

## GENRE RENEWAL: TRANSFORMING "ONCE UPON A TIME" FORMULAS IN LITERARY FAIRY TALES

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**ABSTRACT:** THE FOCUS OF THIS PAPER IS ON THE WAYS THE TRADITIONAL INITIAL AND FINAL FORMULAIC LINES OF THE FOLK TALE GENRE ARE TRANSFORMED IN VARIOUS LITERARY FAIRY TALE AND FANTASY TEXTS. THESE FORMULAS ANCHOR AND SHAPE THE READER'S PERCEPTION OF THE WRITTEN TEXT AS AN ORAL NARRATIVE ACCORDING TO THE GENRE TRADITION. THE AUTHORS TRANSFORM THE STEREOTYPIC MODEL BY INCORPORATING NEW INFORMATION INTO IT. THE PAPER EXPLORES THE EFFECTS OF ALIENATION FROM THE PROTOTYPE SCHEME OF THE FAIRY TALE GENRE.

**KEY WORDS:** FOLK TALE, LITERARY FAIRY TALE, GENRE SCHEME, PROTOTYPE, FRAMING FORMULAS.

**FAIRY** tale (folk or literary) is recognized to be the first poetic form, the most important cultural event people come into contact with. Any text written or told within the tradition follows the basic formulas, which shape the genre.

**FOLK** tale may be regarded as a non-productive genre form, since no new stories are created within folklore tradition, but it has its "revival feast" in literary genres: literary fairy tales and fantasy. As Vladimir Propp noted: "like any living thing the tale can generate only forms that resemble itself. If any cell of a tale organism becomes a small tale within a larger one, it is built... according to the same rules as any fairy tale" [1, p. 172]. Literary fairy tales being by definition the author-centered products, present a very fruitful material for investigating the ways the authorial figure reveals in a story. Literary fairy tale appropriates and reworks the prototypical narrative schemes of its antecedent genre – the folk tale. Game principle is also inherent in the majority of literary fairy tales. The game starts the moment the author refers to the ancient genre tradition. The author does not break off with folk tradition, but gives it a new life, reveals its hidden potential.

**THE** formulaic lines used in the strong positions of the text, the very beginning and the very end of a tale are unalienable elements of the prototypical genre scheme, which anchor and shape the reader's perception of the written text as an oral narrative according to the genre tradition. The authors of the literary tales transform the stereotypic model by incorporating new information into it thus helping the reader to foretell the type and tone of their narrative: what will his story be like? The more the author alienates from the prototype scheme the more difficult it is to interpret his story in terms of a particular genre.

**CONVENTIONAL** opening and final lines are easily identified as the borrowings from the folk tale esthetic system, the idea of which is deeply rooted in a collective memory. They provide the background, which highlights the originality of the author. The author has in mind his target reader and his peculiar perception, the effect of genre expectation. For example, in A.A. Milne *“Winnie-the-Pooh”* story telling is marked by a traditional stock phrase *“Once upon a time a very long time ago now”*, which is specified by a controversial *“about last Friday”*[2]. The stylistic device bathos used here helps perceive the story as a funny fantasy, a game in a tale of an adult (a story teller) and a child, to whom the story is meant.

**CH. DICKENS'S** *“The Magic Fish-Bone”* starts with a traditional formula of existence, which has all the typical features: folk tale uncertainty and fairy tale characters – the king and the queen: *«Once there was a king and he had a queen, he was the manliest of his sex, and she was the loveliest of hers, the king was in his private profession, under government, the queen's father had been a medical man out of town»* [3]. But then the author provides the formula with details about low social and professional status of his heroes: the preposition *under* highlights the dependence of the king and *a medical man out of town* - a low social origin of the queen. These details contradict the characters' royal status and contrast their appearances description (all adjectives in superlative degree). These details also signal the reader that the tale is a parody.

**OSCAR WILDE'S** tales may be characterized as anti-tales for their non typical for the fairy tale genre tragic notes in the end. In his opening lines to *«The Star Child»* the author resorts to the prototypal once-upon-a-time beginning, which he extends with poetic nature description, marked by his elaborate style:

*«Once upon a time two poor woodcutters were making their way home through a great pine forest. It was winter, and a night of bitter cold. The snow lay thick upon the ground, and upon the branches of the trees: the frost came snapping the little twigs on either side of them, as they passed: and when they came to the Mountain Torrent - she was hanging motionless in air, for the Ice King had kissed her»*. Using dark colors the author prepares his reader for the dramatic plot with a tragic end, which then seems only natural: *«Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly»*[4]. In both formulas the author uses an adjective *bitter*: *bitter cold* in opening lines and *bitter fire* in the final lines, thus making it a key concept of the tale that symbolizes immutable fate.

**IN J. Ruskin's** tale *«The King of the Golden River»* initial formula is also enlarged with poetic nature description that creates high flown smooth rhythm of narration:

*«In a secluded and mountainous part of Stiria there was, in old time, a valley of the most surprising and luxuriant fertility. It was surrounded, on all sides, by steep and rocky mountains, rising into peaks, which were always covered with snow, and from which a number of torrents descended in constant cataracts. One of this fell westward, over the face of a crag so high that, when the sun had set to everything else, and all below was darkness, his beams still shone full upon this waterfall, so that it looked like a shower of gold. It was, therefore, called by the people of the neighborhood the Golden River»*[5].

**THE** opening lines also introduce the place where the story unfolds, but not the main heroes. Valley and the golden river are moved to the spotlight. The idea of love for ones motherland becomes the key idea of the text.

ANY folk fairy tale is marked with its strife for good. In kindred literary genres of fairy tale and fantasy it acquires Christian morality features, incorporated in the framing formulas. Thus in final lines of *«The King of the Golden River»* the moral is not that explicit: *«And, to this day, the inhabitants of the valley point out the place where the three drops of holy dew were cast into the stream, and trace the course of the Golden River under the ground until it emerges in the Treasure Valley. And at the top of the cataract of the Golden River are still to be seen TWO BLACK STONES, round which the waters howl mournfully every day at sunset; and these stones are still called by the people of the valley.*

*The Black Brothers»*[5], but the key words make up two associative chains: *holy dew - Golden River - the treasure valley* – the reminder of a good deed of a younger brother. The second chain *two black stones - howl mournfully - the black brothers* signals the reader about the inevitable punishment for the sinners.

CH. KINGSLEY in his *«The Water Babies»* exploits a prototypical scheme in his framing formulas which highlight the Christian moral: *«Once upon a time there was a little chimney-sweep, and his name was Tom. He had never been taught to say his prayers. He never had heard of God, or of Christ, except in words which you never have heard, and which it would have been well if he had never heard»*[6].

THE final formula of the novel suggests an ironic rethinking of a prototypical fairy tale wedding formula: *«And of course Tom married Ellie! »*

*My dear child, what a silly notion! Don't you know that no one ever marries in a fairy tale, under the rank of a prince or a princess?»* [6]. It is also interesting in terms of a dialogue between the author and his reader based on common knowledge of genre conventions.

RUDYARD KIPLING'S *«Just so Stories»* present a peculiar synthesis of folk and myth traditions marked by the original author's style. As a story-teller he uses conventional genre formulas as a basis, and while transforming them, he never repeats himself:

*"IN the sea, once upon a time, O my Best Beloved, there was a Whale, and he ate fishes";*

*"In the beginning of years, when the world was so new and all, and the Animals were just beginning to work for Man, there was a Camel, and he lived in the middle of a Howling Desert because he did not want to work; and besides, he was a Howler himself";*

*"IN the High and Far-Off Times the Elephant, O Best Beloved, had no trunk";*

*"NOT always was the Kangaroo as now we do behold him, but a Different Animal with four short legs";*

*"THIS, O Best Beloved, is another story of the High and Far-Off Times";*

*"HEAR and attend and listen; for this befell and behappened and became and was, O my Best Beloved, when the Tame animals were wild"[7].*

THE initial formulas, imitating in a grand manner the style of a folk narration, take the reader to a very ancient time, the time of world and myth creation. This effect is overturned by the author at the start, who breaks the traditional broody storytelling rhythm of his narration, and in the sentences that immediately follow the opening formula uses the nursery rhyme rhythm, thus winking at the reader, signaling him, that he will create the playful version of myth and he invites the reader to join him.

KIPLING'S target readers are little children, and this is designated, of course, not only in the title of the cycle *«Just so stories for little children»*. To involve his readers in a game, the author uses the so-called nursery lexis, which is not homogeneous: some of the nursery words

he uses are registered in a dictionary, but most of them are the product of the author's imagination, who knows well the mechanisms of the nursery word production (*twirly-whirly, tusky-musky, snarly-yarly*). As the ending element to his tales Kipling uses his own poems that perform the function of a moral, though very unobtrusive and humorous in Kipling's case.

**ANOTHER** tendency may be characterized as a demonstrative deliberate denial of traditional story telling style through parodying it. The authors play with genre conventions, destroying its structural elements: the beginning and the end.

**J. JACOBS** in his *«Sir Gammer Vans»* destroys traditional scheme making it a complete nonsense by overturning almost each introduced idea with an opposite one:

*«Last Saturday morning at six o'clock in the evening as I was sailing over the top of the mountains in my little boat, I met two men on horseback riding on one mare»*

*«I shot at them; some say I killed eighteen; but I am sure I killed thirty-six, besides a dead salmon which was flying over the bridge, of which I made the best apple-pie I ever tasted»*[8].

**D. BISSET'S** *«The River of Words»* is built on a play with a stock phrase *once upon a time*. The characters *the river of words* and *the otter* try to make up a story, but the otter constantly flops into the river mixing up words. The formula is broken, there is no proper story: *«Let's write a story! Once upon a time ... <...> when suddenly a little otter swam across the river and the words got into the wrong order so that instead of writing «Once upon a time» it wrote «On a Once up time» and it got in a frightful muddle»*. The prototypical formula of uncertainty then is transformed into a formula of time specification: *«It's going to be a story in a book called THIS TIME STORIES»*. The idea of denial is highlighted by capitalization.

**THE** analysis shows that initial and final formulas in literary tradition become intertextual frames, basic structural elements, associated with a prototype genre of a fairy tale, though transgressing its original scheme.

**WE** may suggest that when the author frames his narration using the prototypical formulas, he immerses himself into genre traditions of a folk tale, which actualize the collective unconscious; it saves him and his implicit reader from the fear of death, as the Russian scholar Michail Bakhtin posited: "nothing is absolute, every sense will have its revival feast" [9]. The author of a literary fairy tale gives rebirth to a genre, and the genre being renewed brings the authorial figure to the spotlight. Transformations of prototypical formulas characterize literary fairy tale as an open genre system, they reveal double coding within its structure: suggesting, on the one hand, well-known cultural code, genre predictability, and, on the other hand, author-reader set-up, which models free semantic choice.

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